

Cornelia's Mother

Cornelia's mother had headaches and lay on the couch in the living room with the shades pulled down, a wet washcloth over her forehead. I thought it was so romantic, just like white women in the movies who had fainting spells. Well, I guessed that made sense too, since she was more white than she was black, although of course I knew she was colored, just like us. Only not really like us.

Cornelia and I had met in the schoolyard at the beginning of our third-grade school year. She was new here. I'd noticed her for the past couple of days standing by the end of the fence, just back from where we jumped rope at recess.

"Hi, you want to play jump rope?"

No, thanks." She shook her head quickly, but smiled a bit, showing a tiny dimple on her left cheek, just below where other people had dimples.

"You don't like to jump?" I asked.

"I'd rather just watch. I'm not very good at it."

"Well, neither am I. I just do it anyway."

"Oh, come on, I've been watching long enough to know better. You're just trying to make me feel good."

"Did it work?" She nodded. We laughed.

We were quiet, examining one another. Her eyes took in my dark brown complexion, broad nose and full lips; my nappy hair with braids so tight they curled up at the ends, my ashy face and skinny legs, scuffed shoes and tumbledown socks. I wondered if the sash of my dress was torn. I played so roughly that the sash, tied in a bow in back, would often tear out from the seam at one side of the waist and hang down with the bow still tied, without my even noticing. Just as often, the hem would tear as I climbed over a fence and jumped to the ground.

As Cornelia's eyes passed over me, I was examining her too. She was exactly my height--we were both short for our age--but that's the closest she came to looking like me. She was the color of coffee ice cream, and just as smooth. Her hair, just a shade darker than straw, was parted in the middle and pulled straight back from a high, round forehead above inquisitive light brown eyes only a little darker than her hair. Two perfect thick braids reached barely below her shoulders, with a rust-colored bow sitting precisely above the end of each one.

"What grade are you in?" I asked.

"Third."

"I thought so. Well, how do you like Miss Bellamy?"

"How'd you know I have Miss Bellamy?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," I teased, stepping back into the game to take my turn at the rope.

The next day at recess I spied Cornelia beside the fence and, ignoring the jump rope crowd, moved over to join her. Her large brown eyes watched me steadily as I approached. For a fleeting moment I wished I didn't have to wear glasses. I actually liked them, but I'd heard people say I had such pretty eyes it's a shame I had to wear them. For the first time, I agreed. As I came closer, Cornelia's smile spread and the dimple appeared.

"I know how you knew I have Miss Bellamy," she announced. I grinned at her.

"Yeah, how?"

"Because there's only two third grades in the school, and you're in the other one."

"Give the girl a gold star," I said, standing tall and sweeping my arm toward her. We fell out laughing, because Miss Bellamy was famous for giving out those little gold stars.

"Have you gotten any of them on your papers yet?" I asked. She nodded, still smiling.

"Oh, the girl is smart, too," I said.

"What do you mean, *too*?" she asked softly. I suddenly became tongue-tied. What I'd meant was that she was smart as well as pretty, but of course I couldn't say it. Nobody talked that way in our neighborhood.

"So, where do you live?" I said instead. That afternoon, we walked to her house slowly, to make it last, before I ran the last two blocks home.

Cornelia was fun to be with. We'd march along three-legged, arms around waists, our middle legs so perfectly matched that we could gradually increase to a very fast run, then slow it down whenever we decided, without even saying a word or exchanging a glance. We made up word games with clues and codes that no one except ourselves knew the rules to--the kind you can play with only one person, because if you tried to include other people, the magic would disappear. One of our favorites was called *fast*. I'd start with a word like "sidewalk." She'd have to say a word beginning with the second letter, so she'd say "igloo"; then I'd say "door," she'd say "end"; and so on. But the rule was, you had to say each word faster than the one before, so sometimes we'd be saying words that didn't even make sense, shouting them faster and louder until we just fell out laughing.

The only trouble we had was with Cornelia's mother. She was sick a lot because she was so worried about Cornelia's father, who was overseas fighting "in the service," a phrase I had gradually come to realize was entirely different from the way Mama used "in service," as in, "Cousin Mary lives 'in service' at the Kaplans' out in Newton and only comes into town on Thursdays." A colored photograph of Cornelia's father sat in a gold frame on the table at the side of the couch, only inches from where the mother's feet rested when she was lying down with a headache. With her head propped on pillows, she

could look directly into his face. He wore a brown soldier uniform with three gold stripes on his sleeve. A visored cap sat on top of hair that was the same light shade of gold-brown as Cornelia's. His eyes were darker than hers, but not by much, and he looked directly out at you with a serious but kind expression. His complexion too was a little darker than Cornelia's. The mother was paler than the both of them, but, except for her skin color and her smooth black hair and eyes, she could have been his sister.

She liked Cornelia to stay in the house; unlike the rest of the kids I usually played with, who could wander around freely in our Roxbury neighborhood. Cornelia and her mother lived in a five-room apartment on the second floor of a three-decker red brick building right across the street from a park. Five rooms, for just one woman and a small child! We had seven rooms for a big family of eight. Theirs was sunny, quiet, spacious and extremely neat--an apartment where dishes never piled up in the sink. I'd never seen a roach there, but I just knew if one showed up, her mother would catch her breath in that little, "Oh" kind of in taking quiet gasp.

They were the kind who had dinner instead of supper, who ate meals all matched up with vegetables and potatoes and meat, and never ran out of food or had to have cereal for supper. They wore housecoats and slippers and had pajamas and nightgowns, not old shirts, to wear to bed. And of course, Cornelia would never wet the bed. In my house, besides wetting the bed, we also left clothes lying around and had to run from one room to another looking for our coats when it was time to go out. Sometimes we'd have to rob the bulb from one room to light another, leaving the first room in total darkness while we took care of whichever matter was more pressing elsewhere. We ran out of toilet paper and had to shout from behind the closed bathroom door for someone to bring a piece...or crumpled-up newspaper...or something!

The closed bathroom door also signified my only moments of privacy. In a family of seven children, with various sets of friends constantly coming and going, sitting

and gabbing, eating, smoking, playing cards, arguing, listening to music and dancing, among other things, it took a bit of scheming just to find a quiet corner to read. My solution was to lock the door and sit on the laundry bag in the corner. But my solitude never lasted longer than 10 minutes, and the last five of that was usually accompanied by impatient banging on the door and loud shouting. It seemed as if no one ever thought about going to the bathroom until I got in there. I'd keep reading while part of my mind measured the level of intensity in the voice outside the door, relinquishing my concentration and slamming the book shut only when the timbre of the voice matched the urgency of the message, "COME OUT OF THERE RIGHT NOW, RIGHT NOW, WILL YOU PLEEEEEEEZE??"

I couldn't imagine Cornelia having to put up with such confusion. But then again, I didn't have to put up with anything near what Cornelia did if she wanted someone to come visit. "Can you come play at my house tomorrow?"

"Sure I can. Right after school?"

"Wait, first I have to ask my mother, then I'll let you know."

"Well, why didn't you ask her first?"

"I don't know. It makes me nervous to ask, so just in case you couldn't come . . ."

"Why shouldn't I be able to come? You know I can come whenever I want to. It's just to play, it's not like staying over or something."

"Don't get mad, Aleta. My mother's not like yours. You know that."

"I'm not mad. Only dogs get mad."

Cornelia was silent. Then she said, "Okay, then, you're not mad, you're angry."

"Well, why does she have to make such a big commotion about everything, anyway?"

"How do I know? Do you think I like it?" Cornelia's face was starting to turn red. She was the only colored person I'd ever seen turn red when she got upset.

"Okay, okay," I said, "you can let me know what she says tomorrow. Just calm down, we don't want you to get apoplexy, do we?" I'd just discovered the word, and looked for occasions to use it. She smiled. Even though I sometimes lost patience with Cornelia's mother, part of me was fascinated by the way they lived. So neat. So orderly. The mother so carefully taking care of herself, lying back among the pillows on the couch.

Cornelia and I would play dolls or jacks quietly in her room or on the back porch--which had a linoleum on the floor--and, if we laughed out loud, her mother would say in a whiny voice I had never heard from an adult, "Cornelia, please, dear, I have a headache."

"Sorry, Mother," Cornelia would say. I had only heard white kids in the movies say "Mother," instead of "Ma" or "Mama" or Momma." If we let the porch door slam, it would be, "Cornelia, if you can't be quiet, your friend will have to go home. Mother is feeling ill." Ill. Nowhere outside of a book had I ever heard that word spoken aloud except for teachers who used it instead of "sick" when they sent you to the school nurse.

"All right, Mother, we'll be quiet," Cornelia would say, looking pleadingly at me. I tried not to show what I was thinking, but sometimes it was beyond my control, and I would feel my eyes roll, totally on their own.

I never knew who else played with Cornelia, but I knew they'd have to have plenty of patience, which I believed I had. Besides, I did a lot of free, unsupervised kind of playing with other friends and with my brother Ralphie--roaming the city as we liked, sneaking on buses, playing jump rope and dodge ball, climbing fences, stealing empty milk bottles from the crates in back of the corner store and reselling them to the proprietor. Cornelia didn't have my carefree type of life, so I could be generous.

But one thing I found it hard to be generous about was that Cornelia's mother never offered me anything to eat. It seemed as if they just didn't think about food. And

since we hardly ever went outside to play, there was no way to swipe any goodies from the grocery or the drugstore--a form of fun I always had with anyone else I hung out with. Still, even if we had been able to go outside, something just told me I couldn't even suggest such a thing to Cornelia.

One other thing, I was a smart kid. I lived across the street from the library and spent a lot of time there. My library card was my most prized possession. On Saturdays, when my brother and sister and most of the other kids in my neighborhood went to the movies, I went to the library. You were allowed to take out only two books at a time, so I'd go early, pick up two books, rush home and read them, then double back before the library closed at five and pick up two more to get me through Sunday. I had also been class-spelling champ every year since first grade. But Cornelia's mother assumed that she could spell over my head, as she did to Cornelia, who sometimes pretended not to understand, just so she could get to hear more.

Cornelia's mother's sister looked enough like her to be her twin and, whenever she visited, they were always smirking at each other while they spelled words about me being nice for coming from "such a family" and how it was good "training" for Cornelia to "share" her toys with me since I'd probably never have such an "opportunity" to play with such "high quality" things otherwise. I never let on that I could decipher such "complicated" words. They almost made me laugh, trying so hard to spell over my head that they were sometimes misspelling. But what made me the most angry was for them to think I couldn't even spell simple four letter words.

One sunny afternoon, Cornelia's mother called us in from the back porch where we were cutting out doll clothes. We came into the kitchen, where they sat listening to Stella Dallas on the radio and drinking tea from pearly china teacups that matched the pot. We had a set just like it in our dining room. The outsides were a delicate yellowish grey color, while the insides were a faint pink with rainbow colors swirling through. A

line of gold ran around the rim of the cups and around the teapot, about two inches above the base. Our tea set sat behind the dusty glass doors of the china closet and only came out on rare occasions, like when Mama's women friends came for a club meeting, or on Thanksgiving when we kids were allowed to drink carefully out of them. Mama said the set had been a wedding present. Somehow it seemed right that Cornelia's mother and aunt would use theirs on a daily basis, just like it seemed right for us not to.

They asked us to run an errand. "Cornelia," said her mother, "would you and Aleta go down to the corner store for me? I need a few things for dinner."

The aunt chimed in. "Yes, this is a perfect time to go, while you have an extra pair of hands. Your mother doesn't feel well, and while I'm here I might as well prepare a good meal for the two of you." She was older than Cornelia's mother by four years, and seemed to like to show it.

The thing about going to the store for Cornelia's mother was, she didn't know the rules of the neighborhood. If you asked a child who wasn't yours to go to the store, you told them to spend a penny on candy--two cents if you didn't know them well or if they seldom did errands for you. If it was a child visiting, you simply gave them a snack or, if you didn't have anything suitable in the house, you asked them to bring back something you had included in your grocery list--cookies or an apple, maybe--then you presented it to them. Having had experience with Cornelia's mother, I knew better than to expect anything out of this trip. I would simply go along as a favor to my friend.

"Here, Cornelia," said the aunt, handing her a piece of paper. "Write this down." As she dictated the grocery list, I stood silently watching Cornelia write in her careful script. We did penmanship every day in school for 20 minutes--the Palmer method, my teacher said--and I envied Cornelia's handwriting. Suddenly, the aunt said, "You take so long to form your letters. Here, give me the paper." She reached out and pulled it toward her, then snatched the pencil from Cornelia's fingers.

Watching my friend's face fall, I said in a snappy voice, "Are we in a hurry or something?" The aunt's hand paused as she turned her whole upper body sideways in her chair to look at me. Her eyes traveled slowly from my face to my feet and back up again. Then, looking me squarely in the eyes, she said, carefully spacing each word, "Well, some people like to have their dinner at a particular time every day, not just haphazardly whenever it happens. So, yes, we would like to get these groceries back here rather soon, if it's all right with you!

We took the list and went down the stairs. When we got outside, I said, "Whew, what a witch you've got for an aunt." I wanted to say something about her mother too, but you didn't talk about a person's mother unless you absolutely couldn't help it--and only if the kids said it about their own mother first. Then you could agree with them. But only a teeny little bit. Cornelia said about her aunt, "Oh, she's all right most of the time. And she really likes you. She always says you're so smart, I should stick with you and I could learn something." I couldn't answer that with anything nice, so I just changed the subject.

When we got back to their building, I opened the door to the upstairs hall and turned to hold it open for Cornelia. She was struggling with the bag, so I said, "Here, I'll take it." Fair was fair, and, since we had forgotten to tell the man to pack the groceries into two bags, Cornelia had carried it all the way from the corner and up the outside steps. So I took it upstairs.

As we entered the apartment, the two sisters smiled slyly at one another. "Look," said the mother, "now Cornelia's got a M-A-I-D." Behind me, I heard my friend catch her breath. We stood in silence. The clock above the table ticked loudly, each second pushing time ever so slowly along. On either side of the clock, screened windows showed the light green of new spring leaves moving gently in the breeze. Yellow curtains with tiny raised brown dots drifted playfully up and down at the windows. As I turned to

my friend, my eyes devoured in one glance the peaceful quiet of the kitchen with its polished red and brown tiled floor, spotless white sink and matching stove, where a shiny kettle emitted steam in a comforting, steady stream. At the brown, enamel-topped table with a red rim running around the edge, I saw the two sisters sitting catty-cornered, staring at us as from wide, dark eyes.

"Bye, Cornelia," I said choked out as I handed her the bag. For one moment, I looked into her loving brown eyes filled with tears, and wanted to reach out to hug her, but I could hear the sisters begin to snicker together behind us. I turned to the door. My hands were so sweaty I couldn't grip the knob to turn it. I knew Cornelia was willing me to look back at her but I couldn't raise my eyes. I could feel them all looking at my belt hanging off my dress, my drooping hem, and tumbledown unmatched socks and run over shoes. Besides, my nappy hair needed rebraiding and my lips were too big. Tears were swelling up at the back of my throat and my eyes were starting to burn.

My hand slipped round and round the knob until finally, with one mighty yank, I flung the door open and stumbled slowly down the stairs, gripping the rail to keep from falling as the hot tears rushed from my eyes. I heard Cornelia's mother calling after me, "Aleta...Aleta? Don't you want to stay and play with Cornelia?" Then, to her sister, in an uncertain voice, "Do you think maybe she understood us?"

"Of course not," announced Cornelia's aunt in that know-it-all tone. Then she said, "Cornelia, did you understand what your mother just spelled?"

I never heard the answer. I never went back. Cornelia and I never played together again.

END